

EXPERT OPINION

# Future Looking Bright for UK Hospitality as Staycations and Outdoor Trade Booms

The new norm for the hospitality sector is proving surprisingly palatable



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May 24, 2021 | 2:11 P.M.

How great was it to see the shutters came up on those pubs and restaurants when the government signalled that outdoor eating and drinking was possible again. Early winners as a result of re-opening were JD Wetherspoon, Primark and the local barbers, of course.

Yet a few weeks have now passed and a new normal is beginning to set in. Office areas are being re-populated so city centres nationwide and in London's case, Soho in particular, have been packed to the rafters. Some pubs have been so busy that in some cases customers have been getting carried away, drinking alcohol too quickly within their two-hour time slot leading to some unfortunate social disturbance issues.

Despite these incidents, however, which are few and far between, re-opening of hospitality in the main has been a success. There have been many media reports from busy areas showing a happy public, having fun, delighted to be out socialising again having drinks with friends. The sight of Covid police on hand to remind those enjoying themselves that social distancing measures remain in place is new to everyone, but is a price we are all happy to pay for our freedom. Long waiting lists for tables are commonplace and ever more staff are being recalled from furlough. There are widespread reports that staffing hospitality venues is proving difficult, which is quite an amazing turnaround from the darkest days last year.

This week, it has come to our attention that a well known, successful hospitality group with ten units in central London is 70 staff short. Those southern European staff are needed back here pronto... It seems the locals are either not qualified or keen to fill their smiley hospitable shoes.

What has surprised me is the number of venues that did not re-open in April, places such as All Bar One on Regent Street W1 and The Crown & Sceptre on Great Titchfield Street W1, both close to Shelley Sandzer's office. Similarly, The Freemasons Arms in Hampstead, near my home. All have extensive areas allowing outdoor trade, yet did not open when permitted. Perhaps some operators misjudged the pent-up demand from the public to go out to socialise, and that for me is a massive opportunity missed. There have been many reports across the sector that like-for-like turnover was equal to or greater than pre-pandemic

with just outdoor seating. That is quite an achievement and underscores how dynamic and creative the hospitality sector is, even in the face of adversity.

So, what next?

May 17<sup>th</sup> was clearly another important milestone in life returning to normal. Hopefully, there will be enough staff recruited locally and those returning to the UK to allow the sector to operate at its best. Those that missed the previous opportunities will look forward to a busy and profitable profit from a busy summer ahead. Staycations seem to be the plan for most so the pent-up domestic demand should support a sector feeling battered and bruised. Hospitality now has chance to thrive, responding with good value offerings, superb service and lightning-fast innovation. For those that know their stuff, the future is looking bright.

**Nick Weir, co-managing director, Shelley Sandzer**